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ARTICLE INFO	C.H. (Neels) van Heerden, Y. Botha and E. Durieux (2009). The relationship between atmospherics, services cape and destination attractiveness of a holiday destination. <i>Innovative Marketing</i> , 5(1)
RELEASED ON	Tuesday, 31 March 2009
JOURNAL	"Innovative Marketing "
FOUNDER	LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”



NUMBER OF REFERENCES

0



NUMBER OF FIGURES

0



NUMBER OF TABLES

0

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The relationship between atmospherics, servicescape and destination attractiveness of a holiday destination

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness at the Forever Resort situated in Bela Bela in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Bela Bela is one of the prime tourist areas in the country and hosts various resorts, lodges, and caravan parks. The study also investigates how perceptions of atmosphere, servicescape and destination attractiveness differ between males and females. A non probability sampling approach generated 194 responses. The findings suggest that there is a positive correlation between the tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness. The difference between male and female perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness is not statistically significant. Past research studies have concentrated mainly on the perceived tourist satisfaction with the atmosphere and servicescape of holiday destinations, without focusing on how gender differences influence tourists' perceptions of a holiday destination. Results suggest that it might not be that important, as originally thought, to develop an atmosphere and servicescape uniquely designed for gender groups.

Keywords: atmospherics, servicescape, tourist satisfaction, holiday destination, destination attractiveness, leisure service settings, gender differences, South Africa.

Introduction

Tourists in leisure service settings spend extended periods of time in the physical surroundings of the service provider. Thus, tourists' perceptions of the servicescape and atmospherics play an important role in determining whether tourists are satisfied with the holiday destination (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996, p. 45). This paper focuses on the relationships between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics (attributes that evoke pleasant feelings), the servicescape (physical surroundings) and the overall tourist destination attractiveness.

Developments in tourism and travel increased competitiveness between holiday destinations around the country. This highlights the importance of destination management in order to understand how tourists perceive the servicescape, atmosphere and destination attractiveness, which will in turn influence the likelihood to recommend the holiday destination to others. It is important for tourist destination marketers to understand the variety of potential factors that influence how tourists evaluate destinations (Weaver, Weber & McCleary, 2007, p. 333).

Previous research has focused on how tourists' perceptions of atmospherics and servicescape influence the levels of tourist satisfaction in service settings where they spend significant periods of time (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994; Mayer & Johnson, 2003; Johnson, Mayer, & Champaner, 2004 & Heide & Gronhaug, 2006). Positive responses to overall perceptions of the servicescape will result in tourists' satisfaction with the holiday destination, which in

turn results in approach behavior (likelihood to recommend the destination to others) (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996; Heide & Gronhaug, 2006). Kozak and Rimmington (2000) measured the important factors that influence destination attractiveness.

Such studies concentrated mainly on the perceived tourist satisfaction with atmospherics and the servicescape of holiday destinations, without a clear focus on how gender differences influence tourists' perceptions of a holiday destination. This study therefore focuses on gender, and differences in perception between genders on atmospherics and the servicescape influence satisfaction with the holiday destinations (destination attractiveness), if at all. Many holiday destinations' target markets are families, thus their product should be designed in such a way to take both genders' perceptions into account, if there are any differences. Very little research has been done in South Africa and internationally on the relationship between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, tourists' perceptions of the servicescape and finally, tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness.

The main purpose of this study is to explore the relationships between the tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness at the Forever Resort situated in Bela Bela in the Limpopo province, South Africa. The study also investigates how tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness differ between males and females, if at all, at the Forever Resort situated in Warmbaths.

More specifically, the study aims to achieve the following research objectives:

- ◆ to determine whether there is a relationship between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics and tourists' perceptions of the servicescape at a holiday destination;
- ◆ to determine whether there is a relationship between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics and tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness at a holiday destination;
- ◆ to determine whether there is a relationship between tourists' perceptions of the servicescape and tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness at a holiday destination;
- ◆ to determine whether gender differences exist in tourists' perceptions of atmospherics at a holiday destination;
- ◆ to determine whether gender differences exist in tourists' perceptions of the servicescape at a holiday destination;
- ◆ to determine whether gender differences exist in tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness at a holiday destination.

1. Literature review

In holiday destination marketing atmospherics, servicescape and destination attractiveness play an important role in influencing the perceptions of tourists about the level of quality of service that they receive during their stay. This will influence the choice of destination, consumption of goods and services while they are on holiday, as well as the likelihood to recommend the destination to others (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000, p. 260).

In service settings, services are produced and consumed simultaneously. The tourist thus participates in the production process and interacts with the environment. The environment is therefore viewed as an important part of the physical evidence of the service encounter at holiday destinations. The higher the interaction between the tourist and the facility, the more likely it is that the tourist will view the facility as the service (Mayer, & Johnson, 2003, p. 22).

2. Tourists' perceptions of the servicescape at a holiday destination

2.1. Servicescape defined. Wakefield and Blodgett (1994, p. 67) define the servicescape as the "built environment", or the man-made, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment. They identify two important aspects of the servicescape, namely spatial layout and functionality; and elements related to aesthetic appeal.

Spatial layout and functionality refer to the way in which hallways, walkways, food service lines, restrooms, entrances and exits are designed in leisure service settings. This affects comfort, and the ease at which tourists can navigate through the facility.

Aesthetic appeal refers to factors such as the surrounding external environment, the architectural design, facility upkeep and cleanliness, and other physical elements in the servicescape (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994, pp. 67-68).

2.2. The importance of the servicescape at a holiday destination. Mayer and Johnson (2003, p. 22) suggest that the servicescape serves a functional as well as a marketing purpose. The service provider must therefore recognize that the servicescape may become a crucial component in the marketing strategy. This is due to the fact that the tourists can utilize the physical surroundings to gather vital cues, which form their expectations prior to contact with the service personnel. In such intangible situations, tourists evaluate the "look and feel" of the facility, and more importantly, how the atmosphere affects their experience. The perceived quality of the servicescape might play an important role in determining whether or not consumers are satisfied, as satisfaction influences how long they stay at a destination, and in turn, destination attractiveness (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996, p. 45).

The following is hypothesized:

H1: There is a relationship between tourists' perceptions of the servicescape and tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness at a holiday destination.

2.3. Measuring tourists' perceptions of the servicescape at a holiday destination. According to Mayer and Johnson (2003, p. 23), the tourist's emotional response to a service environment is directly related to the amount of time, and consequently the amount of money that the tourist will spend at the destination. Therefore, the principles of environmental psychology are important for any service provider in managing the service environment.

Heide and Gronhaug (2006, p. 273) also discussed the study done by Bitner (1992). Bitner has designed a general model to understand the impact of the physical environment on individual behaviour. The scope of Bitner's model goes beyond the consumer as it also focuses on the impact on employees.

3. Tourists' perceptions of atmospherics at a holiday destination

3.1. Atmospherics defined. Atmosphere is a commonly used term – both in everyday life and in the business context and can be defined as "the air surrounding a sphere". The term is also used more colloquially to describe the quality of the surroundings. For example, it can be said that a restaurant has atmosphere. This refers to certain attributes that evoke pleasant feelings. Atmosphere can be viewed as created by the interaction between individuals and their environment (Heide & Gronhaug, 2006, p. 273).

3.2. The importance of atmospherics at a holiday destination. Atmosphere is an essential variable for explaining satisfaction among holiday destination guests, regardless of the type of destination, location, or nationality of the guests. Both servicescape and atmosphere play an important role in tourist satisfaction. However, these two terms differ significantly, but both influence destination attractiveness. In the context of service delivery, it is important to make a distinction between atmosphere and servicescape. While servicescape is the physical environment in which services are delivered, atmosphere can be viewed as the result of interaction between people (service providers and tourists), and the physical environment (servicescape) (Heide & Gronhaug, 2006, p. 273). Therefore, as mentioned earlier it is important to explore the relationship between atmosphere and servicescape and what influence they have on destination attractiveness.

The following is hypothesized:

H2: There is a relationship between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics and tourists' perceptions of the servicescape at a holiday destination.

3.3. Measuring tourists' perceptions of atmosphere at a holiday destination. Yalch and Spangenberg (2000, p. 139) described a study done by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) where they developed a framework for analyzing the effects of environments on individuals, with emphasis on the role of nonverbal responses to environmental factors. This framework has been used by other studies to analyze the effects of specified atmospheric stimuli such as music, lighting, colors and odors/olfactory cues. A major criticism against Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) framework is that it mainly focuses on the emotional states created by the environment and may underestimate important cognitive reactions (Yalch & Spangenberg, 2000: 140).

Countryman (2006, p. 1) examined the atmospheric elements of color, lighting, layout, style and furnishings that constitute the physical environment of hotel lobbies and how these elements influenced the overall guest perceptions and impressions. Atmosphere therefore generates a reaction within or among individual guests. In other words, the atmosphere is expected to evoke an internal response. It is also well known that a guest's choice of hospitality products is based on both rational as well as emotional considerations, and it may be argued that perceptions of atmosphere lead to certain emotions, beliefs, and physiological sensations, which in turn influence behaviors (Heide & Gronhaug, 2006, pp. 271-274).

4. Tourists' perception of holiday destination attractiveness

4.1. Perceived customer satisfaction, tourist satisfaction and destination attractiveness. Customer perception, and as a result customer satisfaction, is very important for successful destination marketing. This is due to its influence on customers' choice of destination according to previous experience from different destinations. Comparisons between destinations, facilities and services also influence their perceptions of destination attractiveness. As we are exploring customer satisfaction in a tourism context, we will refer to 'tourist satisfaction', which will be reduced to 'destination attractiveness' according to Kozak and Rimmington's (2000) study on tourist satisfaction. They stated (p. 260) that competitiveness is established between tourist destinations and tourist businesses rather than between countries, because of the different features of destinations within a country. Travel agents will also rather sell destinations than countries. As a result of the increase in demand for packaged holidays over the past two decades, the focus on destinations is stronger than the focus on individual attractions. Therefore, the tourists overall satisfaction with a destination is more important than the tourists satisfaction with a single facility in creating repeat visits.

Chen and Gursoy (2001, p. 79) define destination loyalty as tourists' perceptions of a destination as a recommendable place. Repeat visits may not truly represent tourists' loyalty. Those that do not return may simply seek new travelling experiences. Thus tourists' willingness to recommend a destination can be used as an indicator of their loyalty.

4.2. The importance of the destination attractiveness of a holiday destination. Previous research findings showed that there is a significant relationship between tourist satisfaction, intention to return and positive word-of-mouth. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction is also important, because it influences the tourists' perception of destination attractiveness and the expectation for future product purchases. As mentioned above, both atmospherics and servicescape play an important role in tourist satisfaction. This means that favorable tourist experiences are an important competitive advantage for destination attractiveness (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000, p. 261).

The following is hypothesized:

H3: There is a relationship between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics and tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness at a holiday destination.

4.3. Measuring tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness of a holiday destination. Different approaches to measuring destination at-

tractiveness have been explored during the past three decades, but a consensus approach has not been reached. Tourists' expectations of a destination will influence the perception of performance and as a consequence the perceived level of satisfaction and perceived destination attractiveness (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000, p. 261).

King (2001, p. 80) referred to a study done by Tylor (1998) who determined that the "likelihood of a tourist to recommend a product or service to other", the "likelihood to purchase a product or service again", and the "overall satisfaction" constituted good indices to assess tourist loyalty.

Previous tourist satisfaction research indicated that different options are available regarding when to measure tourist satisfaction. These include pre-holiday expectations, and post-holiday perceptions, monitoring during the holiday experience, complete holiday experience and just before the complete holiday experience (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000, p. 261). They label (p. 267) the following three factors as especially crucial in determining tourist satisfaction of a destination: destination attractiveness; tourist attractions and facilities; and facilities and services at the destination. They argue that there is no consensus on how to measure tourist satisfaction as literature suggests that tourist satisfaction is a function of overall post-purchase evaluation.

4.4. Gender differences in tourists' perceptions.

This study attempted to establish whether a difference exists in tourists' perceptions towards the servicescape, atmospherics and destination attractiveness between males and females. Each gender perceives different products/service aspects as being of importance. Some aspects of the service offering might be unimportant to males, whereas females might perceive them to be of great importance (Shiffmann & Kanuk, 2004, p. 57).

4.4.1. The importance of gender differences in tourists' perceptions. It is important to establish how tourists' perceptions of the servicescape, atmospherics and destination attractiveness differ between males and females at holiday destinations, if at all. Many holiday destinations cater for families, and should attempt to create service settings that are appealing to both genders. Holiday destinations provide services mainly aimed at one of the genders, such as quad bike areas for men and spa areas for women, and therefore establishing the importance of the servicescape, atmospherics and destination attractiveness to each gender is important.

The following can therefore be hypothesized:

H4: There is a difference in male and female tourists' perceptions of atmospherics at a holiday destination.

H5: There is a difference in male and female tourists' perceptions of the servicescape at a holiday destination.

H6: There is a difference in male and female tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness at a holiday destination.

5. Methods

5.1. Sampling. The target population for the study consisted of all tourists, aged eighteen and above, who visited Forever Resorts in Bela Bela on two weekends. Due to the fact that only tourists at the abovementioned holiday destination were targeted, the findings of this study are not representative of all tourists visiting holiday destinations.

Holiday destinations have guest lists, which are available to researchers, thus a probability sampling method was considered. However, tourists on holiday might not be readily available at their campsites or chalets, and might not answer their phones as they normally would; therefore the possibility of using a probability sampling method was discarded.

A convenience sample of respondents is selected because they were "in the right place, at the right time". Convenience sampling was the most feasible sampling method, given that at a holiday destination it is difficult to use another method to draw a sample, due to the undefined availability of the target population. This study also researched whether differences exist between perceptions of males and females, thus quota sampling was used. Quota sampling improves the representativeness of different sub-groups (Cooper & Schindler, 2006, pp. 423-425). The sample size of 200 respondents was divided into 100 males, and 100 females, in order to make the sample as representative as possible of both genders.

Non-probability sampling is, however, less reliable than probability sampling. A negative consequence of convenience sampling is the potential for selection bias, which may distort research findings (Cant, Gerber-Nel, Nel & Kotzé, 2003, p. 127). With quota sampling there is no assurance that the sample is representative of the variable being studied. The variables might also not include all possible variables that exist within the population. The choice of subjects is left to field workers to make on a judgmental basis (Cooper & Schindler, 2006, pp. 423-425). To limit selection bias the field workers attempted to target a variety of respondents from different age groups and races.

During data collection, the field workers managed to interview 209 respondents almost equally divided between males and females visiting the resort. Due to missing responses in some of the

questions, 15 questionnaires had to be excluded from the analysis, therefore, leaving 194 valid questionnaires – 100 males and 94 females.

6. Data collection

The questionnaire was pre-tested with a convenience sample of 10 male and 10 female tourists above the age of eighteen years old, who had visited the Forever Resort in Bela Bela during the previous six months. This was done by using the collaborative participant pre-testing method described by Cooper and Schindler (2006, p. 396).

Intercepting tourists at the Forever Resort in Bela Bela collected the data during the months of August and October 2007. The questionnaire was completed by conducting personal interviews with respondents as described by Cooper and Schindler (2006, p. 204). Personal interviews with respondents at the holiday destination ensure better quality data than

self-administered survey questionnaires because respondents easily get distracted at a holiday destination. Before conducting the survey, Forever Resort’s brand manager’s permission was obtained. To avoid the potential bias due to the use of non-probability sampling, surveys were conducted at various times of the day, over three days during two weekends. The interviewers approached tourists at the pool and entertainment areas. No incentives were provided to respondents who completed the questionnaire.

7. Measures and results

7.1. Descriptive statistics for tourist prior knowledge of the holiday destination. Table 1 provides a profile of the respondents in terms of their prior-knowledge of the Forever Resort in Bela Bela in the Limpopo province. The results indicate the majority of the respondents have visited the destination previously (56.7%).

Table 1. Tourists’ prior knowledge of Forever Resorts in Bela Bela

	Prior knowledge variable	N	%
Valid	The destination was recommended by a friend or family member	64	33.0
	Through an advertisement	8	4.1
	I have visited the destination previously	110	56.7
	Other	8	4.1
	Total	190	97.9
Missing	System	4	2.1
Total		194	100

Notes: A multiple choice single response question was used to indicate how tourists came to know about the holiday destination. *N* = total sample. * Other ways in which respondents became aware of the destination include the following: through clubs/societies, live close to the resort, through the Internet.

7.2. Descriptive statistics for tourists’ perceptions of the servicescape. In this study a seven-point Likert scale was used to measure the construct, tourists’ perceptions of servicescape. The scale was obtained from a study conducted by Boshoff (2006, pp. 5-6) who measured satisfaction at a leisure service setting. This scale had seven points, with 1 being strongly disagree, 2 being slightly disagree, 3 being disagree, 4 being neutral, 5 being slightly agree, 6 being agree, 7 being strongly agree, and the last point “don’t know”. The scale measured 11 items. Only items applicable to this study were used in the scale.

The mean (*M*) ratings of the components of the servicescape are presented in Table 2 below. The components of servicescape that were perceived as most positive, are restaurant location (*M* = 6.07; *SD* = 1.11) and ease of finding the bathrooms (*M* = 6.07; *SD* = 1.43). The component that scored the lowest was color schemes (*M* = 5.16; *SD* = 1.58). On average, the total servicescape was perceived as between “mostly satisfied” and “happy” (*M* = 5.78; *SD* = 0.97).

Table 2. Tourists’ perceptions of components of the servicescape

Servicescape variables	N	M	SD
Total servicescape	194	5.77	0.96
Ease of finding the bathroom	188	6.07	1.42
Restaurant location	182	6.07	1.11
Ease of finding destination	191	6.05	1.35
Convenient bathroom location	188	5.94	1.25
Number of bathroom facilities	184	5.90	1.32
Layout accessibility	192	5.89	1.36
Restaurants cleanliness	143	5.86	1.25
Attractiveness	192	5.62	1.47
Architecture of facilities	192	5.55	1.46
Decoration	192	5.41	1.51
Color schemes	193	5.16	1.57

Notes: Scale ranges from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 7 (“Strongly agree”); the higher the mean score, the more positive the tourists’ perceptions of the servicescape. The Cronbach’s Alpha for this scale was measured as 0.92. *N* = total sample, *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation.

A reliability analysis of the scale measuring servicescape indicated a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.9, which indicates acceptable internal consistency reliability, as was the Cronbach’s Alpha measured by Boshoff

(2006, p. 9), which exceeded the minimum point of 0.7. Assuming that these factors are representative of the aspects that influence tourists' perceptions of the servicescape, it can be concluded that the holiday destination's servicescape is positively perceived by tourists. In order to improve the level of tourists' satisfaction with the holiday destination's servicescape, management should consider upgrading their facilities and improving them in such a manner that tourists' perceptions of the holiday destination will improve. Special attention can be given to the color schemes. These are obviously generalized conclusions that do not necessarily exclude possible improvement of the other factors that influence perceptions of servicescape. The generalizability of these conclusions across different tourist characteristics needs to be verified.

7.3. Descriptive statistics for tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness. In this study, a seven-point Likert scale constructed by Kozak

(2003, p. 232) was used to measure destination attractiveness. The scale had seven points, with 1 being terrible, 2 being unhappy, 3 being mostly dissatisfied, 4 being neither dissatisfied nor satisfied, 5 being mostly satisfied, 6 being happy, 7 being delighted and the last point, "don't know". This scale had 9 items, and no sub-dimensions. Only items applicable to this study's context were used in the scale.

Table 3 below presents the mean (*M*) ratings of the components of destination attractiveness. The component of destination attractiveness that is perceived as the most positive is the natural environment (*M* = 6.04; *SD* = 1.22). The component of destination attractiveness that was rated the lowest is quality and variety of food (*M* = 5.57; *SD* = 1.51). Respondents rated the total perception of destination attractiveness (*M* = 5.78, *SD* = 0.97) as being between "mostly satisfied" and "happy".

Table 3. Tourists' perceptions of components of destination attractiveness

Destination attractiveness variables	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Total destination attractiveness	192	5.78	0.97
Natural environment	191	6.04	1.22
Overall atmosphere	189	5.93	1.12
Attitude of staff	174	5.82	1.20
Cleanliness	190	5.81	1.15
Quality standard	163	5.81	1.01
Value for money	188	5.75	1.34
Hygiene and sanitation	187	5.72	1.15
Service accommodation level	175	5.67	1.26
Quality and variety of food	168	5.57	1.51

Notes: Scale ranges from 1 = "terrible"; 2 = "unhappy"; 3 = "mostly dissatisfied"; 4 = "neither dissatisfied nor satisfied"; 5 = "mostly satisfied"; 6 = "happy"; 7 = "delighted"; the higher the mean score, the more positive the tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness. The Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was measured as 0.93. *N* = total sample, *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation.

A reliability analysis of the scale measuring destination attractiveness indicated a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.92, which indicates acceptable internal consistency reliability, as was the Cronbach's Alpha measured by from Kozak (2003, p. 233) and ranged from 0.95 to 0.96 for all the items measured in this scale. Assuming that these components are representative of the factors that influence tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness, one can conclude that management do not need to direct their attention towards the improvement of destination attractiveness as a whole, but primary efforts should be directed at individual components that scored below the average mean score of 5.78, which are the service accommodation level and the quality and variety of food. These are obviously generalized conclusions that do not necessarily exclude possible improvement of the other factors influencing destination attractiveness. The generalisability of these

conclusions across different tourist characteristics needs to be verified.

7.4. Descriptive statistics for tourists' perceptions of atmospherics. In this study a semantic differential scale, constructed by Countryman (2006, pp. 534-545) was used to measure the perceived atmospherics construct. The scale had seven points, with 1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest on the scale. It also had six sub-dimensions, and a total of 19 items. The scale only contained the positive descriptor of each pair of descriptors; therefore, the negative descriptors were added. Only descriptors applicable to this study were used.

Table 4 below demonstrates the items used to measure perceived atmospherics. It also identifies the items that were reverse-scored during reliability analysis and indicates the Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of each of the six sub-dimensions in the scale.

Table 4. The measurement scale used to measure perceived atmospherics

Sub-dimension	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Style	1, 2(r), 3, 4(r) and 5(r)	0.74
Layout	6, 5, and 8	0.84
Colors	9(r), 10 and 11	0.70

Table 4 (cont.). The measurement scale used to measure perceived atmospherics

Lighting in evening	12 and 13(r)	*
Furnishings	14, 15 and 16(r)	0.81
Overall impression	17(r), 18 and 19(r)	0.79

Notes: (r) – items 2, 4, 5, 9, 13, 16, 17 and 19 were reversed scored. * The sub-dimension “lighting in evening” contains only two items, and therefore a Cronbach’s Alpha cannot be calculated for this sub-dimension.

A reliability analysis of the scale measuring atmospherics realized an overall Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.92, which indicates an acceptable internal consistency reliability, as was the Cronbach’s Alpha measured by Countryman (2006, pp. 534-535), which exceeded the minimum point of 0.7. The answers given by each respondent will be averaged to provide an overall score. A high score will indicate a favorable perception of the holiday destination’s atmospherics. The higher a respondent’s score on a particular sub-dimension, the more he/she is influenced by that particular dimension of perceived atmospherics.

Table 5 below shows the means and standard deviations of the respondents’ perceptions of the atmospherics of the Forever Resort in Bela Bela. The

respondents’ overall perceptions of the atmospherics of the Forever Resort have an average score of 4.35 on a 7-point semantic differential scale. This means that the respondents are fairly satisfied with the destination’s atmospherics. The sub-dimension that received the highest score in the scale is layout. They perceive the layout as being graceful (5.30), proportionate (5.27) and accommodating (5.54). The sub-dimension that received the lowest score was the total impression of the holiday destination. The total impression earned a slightly above neutral mean score of 3.73. The perceived total impressions were closer to poor (2.75) and uncomfortable (2.85), but the overall destination was perceived as fairly beautiful (5.61).

Table 5. Tourists’ perceptions of components of atmospherics

Atmospherics variable	N	M	SD
Total atmospherics	194	4.35	0.51
Total style	194	3.95	0.89
1. Outdated/current	194	4.95	1.52
2. Inartistic/artistic	189	4.70	1.51
3. Beautiful/ugly	191	3.26	1.73
4. Refined/unrefined	192	3.61	1.57
5. Impressive/unimpressive	190	3.19	1.75
Total layout	194	5.37	1.17
6. Not accommodating/accommodating	191	5.54	1.42
7. Ungraceful/graceful	194	5.30	1.32
8. Disproportionate/proportionate	194	5.27	1.32
Total colors	194	4.51	0.89
9. Unsettling/soothing	193	5.14	1.50
10. Unpleasant/pleasant	192	5.38	1.47
11. Beautiful/ugly	194	3.06	1.62
Total lighting	184	4.27	0.94
12. Inappropriate/appropriate	184	5.32	1.52
13. Inviting/uninviting	183	3.23	1.80
Total furnishings	190	4.53	0.70
14. Uncomfortable/comfortable	188	5.23	1.38
15. Ugly/beautiful	187	5.04	1.47
16. High quality/poor quality	189	3.37	1.60
Total impression	194	3.73	0.95
17. Ugly/beautiful	194	5.61	1.29
18. Comfortable/uncomfortable	194	2.83	1.77
19. Good/poor	194	2.75	1.76

Notes: A semantic differential scale was used with 7 scale points. The higher the mean score, the more positive the perception of servicescape. The Cronbach’s Alpha for this scale was measured as 0.93. N = total sample M = mean, SD = standard deviation.

Assuming that these components are representative of the factors that influence tourists’ perceptions of atmospherics, one can conclude that management need

to direct their attention towards the improvement of atmospherics as a whole, primary efforts should be directed at the destination’s color schemes and the

lighting during the evening. These are obviously generalized conclusions that do not necessarily exclude possible improvement of the other factors that influence perceptions of atmospherics. The generalisability of these conclusions across different tourist characteristics needs to be verified.

8. Hypotheses testing

Figure 1 depicts the relationship between the constructs and corresponding hypotheses as discussed in the literature review.

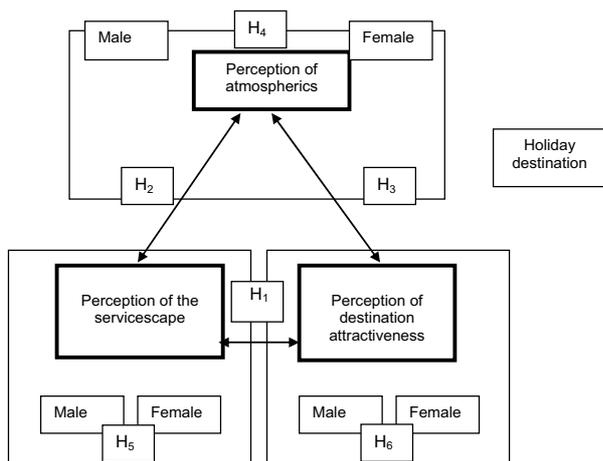


Fig. 1. Relationships between constructs

H1, H2, and H3 deal with the relationships between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness at a holiday destination (Forever Resort, Bela Bela). All are non-directional (two-tailed) hypotheses and were tested at a 5% level of confidence (i.e., $\alpha = 0.05$).

Since the respondents' scores on atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness were measured at an interval level of measurement, the appropriate parametric significance test is Pearson's product moment correlation. This test assumes that there is a linear relationship between the variables being tested, and that all variables have a normal distribution. When this assumption cannot be satisfied, the Spearman's rank order correlation is used as a non-parametric alternative (Kotzé, 2007, p. 46).

The assumption of linearity was tested through the visual inspection of a scatter plot, and the assumption of normality was tested through the use of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality, and visual inspections of histograms and normal probability plots. Since the data violated the normality assumption of the independent sample t-test, the non-parametric alternative, namely the Spearman's rank order correlation test, was used to test the hypotheses as depicted in Table 6.

Table 6. Spearman's rank order correlation test

		Total servicescape	Total destination attractiveness	Total atmospherics	
Spearman's rho	Total servicescape	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.727(**)	0.182(*)
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.011
		N	194	192	194
	Total destination attractiveness	Correlation coefficient	0.727(**)	1.000	0.248(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.001
		N	192	192	192
	Total atmospherics	Correlation coefficient	0.182(*)	.248(**)	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.011	0.001	
		N	194	192	194

Notes: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

8.1. Hypothesis 1. The results from Table 6 indicate that there is a moderate positive correlation (Burns & Bush, 1998, p. 552) between tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness and tourists' perceptions of the servicescape, $r_s(190) = 0.727$, the p -value is 0.000. H1(null) can, therefore, be rejected, and H1(alt) accepted.

8.2. Hypothesis 2. The results from Table 6 indicate that there is a very small positive, although not meaningful correlation (Burns & Bush, 1998: 552) between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics and tourists' perceptions of the servicescape, $r_s(192) = 0.18$, the p -value is 0.011. H2(null) can therefore be rejected, and H2(alt) accepted.

8.3. Hypothesis 3. The results from Table 6 indicate that there is a weak positive correlation (Burns & Bush, 1998: 552) between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics and tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness, $r_s(190) = 0.25$, the p -value is 0.001, which is smaller than 0.05. H3(null) can, therefore, be rejected, and H3(alt) accepted.

8.4. Hypotheses 4, 5 and 6. Hypotheses H4 to H6 focus on differences between male and female tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness at a holiday destination, respectively. These hypotheses are non-directional (two-tailed) and were tested at a 5% level of confidence (i.e., $\alpha = 0.05$).

Since male and female tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness were measured at interval levels of measurement, the appropriate parametric significance test is the independent sample *t*-test. If its assumptions cannot be satisfied, the Mann-Whitney *U*-test can be used as a non-parametric alternative. The independent sample *t*-test has two assumptions: First, it assumes that the variable on which the two groups are compared has a normal distribution in both populations. Second, it assumes that the variable on which the two groups

are being compared has an equal variance in both groups (Kotzé, 2007, p. 67).

The assumption of normality was assessed through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and the Shapiro-Wilk tests for normality, as well as through visual inspection of histograms and normal probability plots (Kotzé, 2007, p. 67). These tests indicate a departure from normality in both sub-samples for all three test variables. Since the data violated the normality assumption of the independent sample *t*-test, the non-parametric alternative, namely the Mann-Whitney *U*-test, was used to test the hypothesis.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics and results of the Mann-Whitney *U*-test conducted to test hypotheses H4 to H6

Hyp.	Variable	Gender	N	M	SD	Results Mann-Whitney <i>U</i> -test
H ₄	Atmospherics	Male	100	4.2890	0.45370	Test statistic: 4331.00 2-tailed <i>p</i> -value: 0.345 Conclusion: Not significant difference, H4(null) not rejected.
		Female	94	4.4199	0.57712	
H ₅	Servicescape	Male	100	5.8033	0.94427	Test statistic: 4654.000 2-tailed <i>p</i> -value: 0.906 Conclusion: Not significant difference, H5(null) not rejected.
		Female	94	5.7500	0.99709	
H ₆	Destination attractiveness	Male	100	5.7567	0.95733	Test statistic: 4340.500 2-tailed <i>p</i> -value: 0.500 Conclusion: Not significant difference, H6(null) not rejected.
		Female	94	5.8106	0.98895	

As the results in the last column of Table 7 show, males and females do not differ significantly in tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness at a holiday destination. In all three cases, the stated null hypothesis is not rejected.

The descriptive statistics in all three cases indicate that the sub-group mean differences are not in line with the expectations formulated in H4 to H6, the two-tailed *p*-values were larger than 0.05.

These findings, therefore, indicate that male and female tourists' perceptions do not differ significantly in their perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness.

These results suggest that it isn't as important as originally thought to develop an environment with an atmosphere and servicescape uniquely designed for each gender.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between the tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness at the Forever Resort, Bela Bela in the Limpopo province, South Africa. The study also investigated how tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness differ between males and females.

This study also focused on gender, and on how differences in perception between genders on atmospherics and the servicescape influence satisfaction with the holiday destination (destination attractiveness), if at all. Many holiday destinations' target markets are families, thus their product should be designed in such a way to take both genders' perceptions into account, if there are any differences.

The findings indicate that the strongest correlation was between tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness and tourists' perceptions of the servicescape. This means that resorts will have to attend to the quality of the physical facilities to ensure maximization of the destination's attractiveness. This will lead to repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth effects. A further finding that there is a weak relationship between the tourists' perceptions of atmospherics and the tourists' perceptions of the servicescape at a holiday destination, leads to a conclusion that physical facilities do not play a major role in creating atmosphere. The natural environment and other non-servicescape factors may be more conducive to creating the right "atmosphere". It may also depend on the needs and expectations of the intended target market that visit the resort. The very weak association between tourists' perceptions of atmospherics and tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness leads to the conclusion that more resources should be spent on servicescape elements

than on creating unwanted/not needed atmosphere elements in ensuring tourist satisfaction.

With regards to gender differences the findings suggest that males and females do not differ significantly in tourists' perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness at a holiday destination. As a result it isn't as important as originally thought to develop an atmosphere and servicescape uniquely designed for each gender. These findings are in line with previous studies in that there is a positive correlation between tourists' positive perceptions of the service environment and tourists' satisfaction. The findings suggested that there is no difference between male and female perceptions of atmospherics, the servicescape and destination attractiveness. The resort is labelled as a "family resort" and it offers conveniences and facilities that address the needs of both sexes.

The results showed that the tourists at the Forever Resort, Bela Bela, gave a fairly high score for the servicescape, which indicates that the tourists are generally satisfied with the servicescape at the resort, however, it is important that management upgrade and modernize their facilities in order to remain competitive and up to date with current trends. The study indicated that tourists are satisfied with the destination attractiveness of the Forever Resort in Bela Bela, which suggests that the holiday destination has all the necessary elements to ensure tourists' satisfaction with the holiday destination. Management should ensure that staff behavior and service should always be of high quality. It is also important that hygiene and sanitation should be considered as extremely important in ensuring tourists'

satisfaction and as a result, destination attractiveness. In addition, management can improve the atmospherics by focusing on the style of the architecture and the design of the destination. The lighting during the evening should be improved. Research suggests that tourists view the destination as convenient and appropriate but not necessarily stylishly impressive.

Limitations

Some limitations might be related to the non-probability method, convenience sampling. A negative consequence of convenience sampling is that it has the potential for selection bias, which may distort research findings (Cant et al., 2003, p. 127). With quota sampling there is no assurance that the sample is representative of the variables being studied.

Another limitation of the study is that only differences between genders were explored, and not differences between cultural groups. Cultural differences in attitudes, behavior and social class might also influence expectations and perceptions. For example, tourists with lower levels of education and income are likely to have lower levels of expectations. They may perceive a holiday at a resort as luxury consumption, resulting in higher levels of vacation satisfaction. In addition, destinations attract tourists from different countries and cultures, so tourists might be more or less satisfied depending on the countries they come from (Kozak and Rimmington, 2000, p. 261).

Another important limitation is that the study was conducted at only one holiday destination. This means that the findings of the study cannot be generalized to any other holiday destination.

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